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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KIEV 000578

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SUBJECT: UKRAINE: ODESA CATHOLICS CONTEMPLATING HUNGER STRIKE

Classified By: Ambassador for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) The Roman Catholic Bishop of the Odesa-Simferopol diocese, Bronislav Bernatsky, told us February 8 that "hundreds" of his parishioners will begin a hunger strike March 1 to protest what he described as "the strangulation of the Catholic Church" by the Odesa city government. The bishop claimed that Roman Catholics in his diocese were outraged by the city's refusal to reconstitute badly-needed Church property, including the diocese seminary building, which was being rented out by a government ministry for profit. Bernatsky characterized the Odesa city and oblast governments as corrupt, Soviet-style bureaucracies run by openly pro-Russia "communist criminals." This alleged pro-Russia bias meant, according to Bernatsky, that the local leader of the predominant Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) had the final say on matters pertaining to religion. Bernatsky alleged that UOC-MP Metropolitan Angafangel recently "advised" the Odesa city council to turn down a request by Catholic charity Caritas to purchase a building to use as a home for 100 street children. End summary.

Hunger Strike in March?

2. (SBU) During a February 8 meeting in his cramped quarters at Odesa's Assumption Cathedral, the Roman Catholic Bishop of the Odesa-Simferopol diocese, Bronislav Bernatsky, told us that "hundreds" of his approximately 16,000 parishioners would begin a hunger strike March 1 to protest what he called "the strangulation of the Catholic Church" by the Odesa city government. Angered by official footdragging on the restitution of Roman Catholic communal property in Odesa, and tired of being ignored by Odesa mayor Eduard Hurvits, the bishop said his faithful had no choice but to do something extreme. A one-day "warning shot" hunger strike on January 25 had gotten the mayor's attention, but produced only "more empty words" and no action from the government.

Seminary Is the Focus

3. (SBU) Bishop Bernatsky stressed to us that, while the Roman Catholic Church had claim to many communal property sites in the city, what the diocese needed most was the return of its seminary. Pointing to the building from the window of his quarters, Bernatsky explained that the seminary had been seized in the Soviet era and turned into a training school run by the Ministry of Transport and Communications. After Ukrainian independence (1991), the downsized school began renting out half of the building, allegedly passing a significant cut of the rent to the mayor's office -- an arrangement that continued to this day, Bernatsky asserted. Bernatsky complained that he had, during his four years as bishop, been criticized repeatedly by municipal officials, including Hurvits (who assumed office in 2005), for having "too many foreign priests" in the diocese. Bernatsky said he had consistently responded by noting that if he could get the seminary back, he could recruit and train more priests locally -- instead of having to rely on clergy from Poland or other cities in Ukraine.

A Soviet City

4. (C) Bernatsky blasted both the Odesa city and oblast governments, characterizing them as deeply corrupt, Soviet-style bureaucracies run by "Soviet-era communist criminals." Moreover, the bishop complained, the governments were openly pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian. The same was true of the local media, which had a clear pro-Moscow tilt; "everything in Odesa," the bishop said, "favors Russia." This pro-Russia bias, Bernatsky claimed, meant that Metropolitan Angafangel, the local leader of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP, the local name for the Russian Orthodox Church), had the final say on matters pertaining to religion.

"Better Homeless, Hungry and Orthodox than Catholic"

15. (SBU) Bishop Bernatsky asked the director of Caritas-Odesa, Father Mykola Hutsal, to provide a specific, recent example of how the UOC-MP, and Metropolitan Angafangel in particular, influenced local politics. Hutsal related that Caritas had for the past year provided ad hoc food and shelter to approximately 100 street children. With funding from an Austria-based Catholic charity, Caritas had petitioned the Odesa city government to purchase and renovate a building to provide a home for the street kids; the sale was put to a vote in the city council and turned down. When Bernatsky and Hutsal inquired about why the sale was vetoed, the city council chairman told them the proposal was shot down "because you'll turn all the kids into Catholics." The chairman allegedly added that the guidance from Metropolitan Angafangel had been clear: better that the street kids were "homeless, hungry and Orthodox than Catholic."

Situation "Worse than under Kuchma"  
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16. (C) In closing, as Bernatsky showed us the privately-funded renovation work under way at Assumption Cathedral, he said that, at least for Roman Catholics in Odesa, things had gotten worse in the last year. This was "ironic," Bernatsky said, given that Odesa's Catholic community had at some risk publicly prayed for free and fair presidential elections in 2004 and supported the Orange Revolution. Bernatsky, who entered the priesthood in 1972 and attended seminary in Riga, acknowledged that Ukraine had made a lot of progress since the Soviet era, "when we were beaten, exiled and shot." He said that then-President Leonid Kuchma had done a decent job of addressing the concerns of Ukraine's Catholics, even if largely out of fear of being criticized by the Vatican and Western countries. President Yushchenko, by contrast, felt he had been given a free pass by the West; thus, in Bernatsky's view, the Orange president paid lip service to religious freedom, but took no action to actually advance it.

Out To Lunch  
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17. (SBU) We had hoped to meet with the head of the Odesa Oblast Department of Religious Issues, but were thwarted in genuine Soviet style. The department chief had agreed to meet with us during our visit, and even set a time. However, as the time for the meeting drew near, he called us to express his growing anxiety about "meeting with foreigners." When we arrived for the meeting, the man's secretary simply informed us that he had "disappeared."

Comment  
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18. (C) Bishop Bernatsky's assertion that Yushchenko has done nothing to advance religious freedom is wide of the mark; it's a characterization not shared by any other major religious leader that we know of. That said, the bishop's frustration about the glacial pace of communal property registration is widely shared and is a concern common to all of Ukraine's major Christian denominations as well as the country's sizeable Jewish and Muslim (primarily Crimean Tatar) communities. Leaders from across Ukraine's religious spectrum have repeatedly told us that they don't doubt Yushchenko's sincerity on the issue; what frustrates them is the continued lack of results.

19. (C) What is happening to Roman Catholics in Odesa may be an unintended consequence of President Yushchenko's well-meaning April 2005 decision to abolish the State Committee on Religious Affairs (SCRA) and lessen the government's role in religion. The SCRA, while deeply flawed, did help protect the interests of minority religious groups and help resolve some property restitution cases. Yushchenko's scrapping of the SCRA has, in effect, left minority religious groups more susceptible to the influences of the dominant local religious organization; in some areas this means the UOC-MP. We should note, however, that in western Ukraine's Lviv Oblast, where Catholics dominate the city council, the UOC-MP is facing difficulties similar to those described by Bishop Bernatsky.

HERBST